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ABSTRACT

Focusing on documentary elements, this study examines the film content and film techniques of 681 motion pictures produced in the United States prior to 1904. Analysis of films by type, subject matter, and trends in subject matter shows that one-third of the early films are documentary in type and three-fourths of the films use subject matter of a documentary nature. In 1898 and 1899, when there was a decline in film production, the films that were produced concentrated on military subjects; it is suggested that, as the novelty of viewing film decreased, film producers turned to the depiction of remote but newsworthy current events, such as the Spanish-American War, as a way to attract larger audiences. After analyzing overall film structure, choice of shots, and arrangement of shots, the study found that early documentaries of news and sport events show the greatest use and development of film techniques. Seven films judged outstanding in their use of film composition techniques are briefly described at the end of the study. (RL)

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DOCUMENTARY ELEMENTS IN EARLY FILMS[1]

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Purpose

The purpose of this study was to trace the development of film content and film techniques in American motion pictures produced prior to 1904. Analysis of the film content of these motion pictures was divided into two general categories: (1) the type of film represented (newsreel, travelogue, melodrama, and so forth); and (2) the general subject matter treated.

Questions asked during the investigation of the content of these films were:

(1) What types of films seemed to be more prevalent among the pre-1904 motion pictures?

(2) What subject matter appeared to predominate in these early films?

(3) What trends, if any, were evident in the choice of subject matter for films produced during the period prior to 1904?

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[1]Excerpted from A Historical Study of the Development of American Motion Picture Content and Techniques Prior to 1904, by Richard A. Sanderson, 1961 (Dissertations on Film Series, ARNO PRESS CINEMA PROGRAM, 1977).

CS 501814

Significance

The materials used in this study (films copyrighted between 1894 and 1904) were deposited as paper prints with the Library of Congress for copyright purposes. These prints had never been used prior to this study (1961) in an organized research program and had not been released for public viewing by the Library of Congress. However, there was more significance to a study of these films than the fact that they had never been subjected to thorough study.

The development of the motion picture as a medium of communication was extremely rapid. The birth, development, and growth of the motion picture took place in such a short span of time that one person could have witnessed the complete process.[2] This rapid development was perhaps responsible for the lack of a comprehensive history of the films produced in this early period. These earliest films were short and rather plentiful, but the paper prints which had been placed in the copyright files of the Library of Congress have become in most cases the only existing copies of these films. The early films were soon forgotten in the struggle to develop and expand this new industry.

There was a great deal of information available on the personal efforts of individuals and organizations in the

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[2]Terry Ramsaye, A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture (Vol. I; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), p. xi.

invention and exploitation of this medium,[3] but little has been said about the earliest products. Many film historians cite the production of "Life of an American Fireman" (copyrighted January, 1903) and "The Great Train Robbery" (copyrighted December, 1903) as the beginning of the American story film and then continue their historical discussions from this point.[3] These two films may mark the beginning of the period in which the American motion picture was used to develop a complete narrative, but there were hundreds of films which preceded these in the years 1894-1904. A study of these relatively neglected films could reveal a great deal of information valuable to a complete history of the development of motion pictures in America.

The documentary tradition in motion pictures has also been described as starting with Flaherty's "Nanook" in America (1920), Dziga Vertov's Russian films (1923), Cavalcanti's "Rien que les heures" in France (1926), Ruttmann's "Berlin" in Germany (1927), and Grierson's "Drifters" in Britain (1929).[4] But it is possible that a documentary approach in filmmaking was born along with the filmmaking process itself in the late 1800's.

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[3]Bardeche and Brasillach, The History of Motion Pictures (1938); DeMille, Hollywood Saga (1939) pp. 16-17; Griffith and Mayer, The Movies (1957), pp. 9-10; Hampton, A History of the Movies (1957); Jacobs, The Rise of the American Film (1939), pp. 38-46; Knight, The Liveliest Art (1957), pp. 17-19; Ramsaye, A Million and One Nights (1926); Rotha and Griffith, The Film Till Now (1949), pp. 70-71; Seldes, Movies for the Millions (1937) p. 21; Vardac, Stage to Screen (1959), p. 180.

[4]Paul Rotha, Documentary Film (London: Faber & Faber, 1936), p. 79.

Method and Materials

The primary source materials for this study were copies of motion picture films which were deposited with the Library of Congress for copyright purposes by film producers during the years 1894 to 1904. The materials viewed and analyzed were 681 films representing motion pictures copyrighted prior to 1904 which had been restored from the paper print collection by August, 1960. This represented all paper prints which had been restored and cataloged through Library of Congress shelf number LC 1610.

The total film sample (681 titles) represented 66.2 per cent of the total number of paper prints respresenting the years 1897-1904 which had been restored by August, 1960. The total restored films were 1,029. There were no restored paper prints representing the years 1894, 1895, and 1896, during which 76 films were registered for copyright.

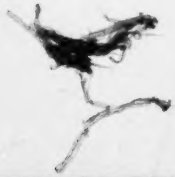
During the viewing process, detailed notations were taken on each film. After the film sample of 681 films was viewed and notes were taken on their content, the categories for analyzing film content and film techniques were established and defined.

Film "types" were categorized under news (actual and enactment), travelogue, documentary, sports, melodrama, tableaux, and entertainment. For purposes of this extract, only the documentary type will be discussed.

Documentary

This category covered a wide area of subject matter with concentration on what might be termed "social" subjects. The early films which were called "actualities" and topical films by some film historians would in most cases fall under the category termed "documentary." The films placed in this category would not conform to the many definitions which have been set forth for the documentary film since these definitions usually depend to a great extent upon the intent or purpose of the film and place greater importance upon the use of a central theme or central idea. The "documentaries" or "actualities" placed in this category represented the use of subject matter similar to those used in documentary films, but lacked the purpose, direction, organization, and interpretation developed by the more modern documentary films. Actually, most films placed under the categories of news, travelogue, and sports (and in many cases those films placed under entertainment) could have been categorized as documentary. However, those other categories were treated as individual categories in anticipation of a large quantity of films falling within these areas which could be considered sub-divisions under "documentary."

Documentary, events--This sub-category was established for placement of films of the documentary type dealing with specific events which took place at a certain time and place and were not likely to be duplicated in everyday life. This sub-category



proved to be unnecessary, however, since most documentary subjects of this importance carried sufficient current event interest to require placement as news films.

Documentary, social relationships and activities--This sub-category contained the greater share of films placed within the documentary category. The title of this sub-category suggests very strongly the type of subject matter found in films placed under it--the day-to-day relationships and activities of human beings which were recorded by the motion picture camera.

Film Types Prevalent, 1897-1904

It was not surprising to find that the most common type of film produced in these early years of film production was of a documentary nature. These earliest years of film production have been commonly described by film historians as a period when topical films or films of "actualities" prevailed.[5] The fact that 221 films representing 32.4 per cent of the films analyzed were found to be of a documentary type added support to this general description of early films. Indeed, all films listed in the categories of news, travelogue, and sports could be classed in one group under "documentary" or topical and "actuality" films. This combination would result in a total of

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[5]Benjamin B. Hampton, A History of the Movies (New York: Covici-Friede Publishers, 1931), p. 14.
Arthur Knight, The Liveliest Art: A Panoramic History of the Movies (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957), p. 10.

572 films of a documentary type or 83.9 per cent of the total films studied. Although these additional films listed under news, travelogue, and sports did qualify as "documentaries" under the broad definition of the term, it was felt that the special qualifications of these films which placed them under individual categories might be significant to this study.

The rank order of film type categories and the percentage which the number of films in each type represented in relation to the total number of films analyzed was as follows:

Documentary	32.4%
Travelogue	23.6%
News	17.3%
Entertainment	14.2%
Sports	10.6%
Tableaux	1.0%
Melodrama	.7%
Other	.2%

It can be noted that those films representing the documentary approach or the topical and "actuality" films (documentary, travelogue, news, and sports) are all among the top percentiles.

The sub-categories under documentary types were not significant. With a total of 221 films of the documentary type, only 29 dealt specifically with planned events and the remaining 192 were devoted to records of social relationships and general social activities. The reason for this low number of films under the sub-category of documented events was that many films covering important topics of the day which might

have been placed in this category were listed under news because of the apparent significance of these events at the time the films were produced.

A further division of films under the category of news revealed that 16.9 per cent of these news films were enactments and not presentations of the actual news event. It was interesting to note that the very first news film in the sample studied and the only news film representing the year 1897, appeared to be a re-enactment of an "Arrest in Chinatown, San Francisco." A great majority of the news enactments were centered around the Spanish-American War and the Boer War. The only year in which the number of news enactments approached or went beyond fifty per cent of the total news films produced in that year was in 1899. This high percentage of news enactments was accounted for by staged productions of the Spanish-American War such as "Rout of the Filipinos," "Capture of Trenches at Candaba," and "Advance of Kansas Volunteers at Caloocan"--all evidently photographed on the shores of New Jersey.[6]

Films of a documentary type were predominant in 1897, 1902, and 1903. This distribution and concentration suggested that the original concentration on topical films and "actualities"

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[6]Maurice Bardeche and Robert Brasillach, The History of Motion Pictures, trans. and ed. Iris Barry (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., and the Museum of Modern Art, 1938), pp. 29-30.

Lewis Jacobs, The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1939), p. 14.

which typified the first year of production were once again given emphasis after the great interest in such news and travel items as the Spanish-American and Boer Wars, the Pan-American and Paris Expositions, and Alaskan Gold Rush activities had lessened.

Subjects Prevalent, 1897-1904

Four categories of subject matter found in the films studied were used at least twice as often as any of the other subjects listed. These categories were military, recreation and entertainment, scenic and travel, and transportation. The rank-file order of these and the other categories from highest to lowest were

Scenic and travel	195
Transportation	149
Recreation and entertainment	134
Military	116
Public figures and current events	54
Animals	52
Pranks, jokes, and slapstick	49
Parades	38
Women	37
Public services	33
Children	31
Industry and business	22
Love and romance	19
Art and photography	10
Other	6

The argument might be presented that the first four categories were highest in rank because they were general and all-inclusive. It was believed, however, that since so many of the films studied concentrated on some form of travel, on pure entertainment values, or on some aspect of military activity, that these subject areas were important to the study as individual categories. The large number of films placed in these four highest categories could also be explained by the fact that many films placed in other categories were also placed in one or more of these four main categories.

It was anticipated that some of these rather general subject areas would contain a great number of entries and so they were broken down into sub-categories for further identification. Those sub-categorized were scenic and travel, transportation, and military. In the case of scenic and travel, cross filing was done in the sub-categories on two separate bases--a comparison of natural with "man-made" scenes, and a separate comparison of national and foreign origins. The result of this separation of natural and "man-made" scenes in the films studied was a predominance of "man-made" over natural scenes by 160 to 35. The results of a separation of national from international scenes were perhaps more significant. The year by year tabulation revealed a fluctuating balance between international and national scenes except for three years: predominantly international in 1898 (Spanish-American War); all national in 1901; predominantly international again in 1902.

The only interpretation which might be gathered from this was that the second year of the twentieth century brought more international subjects before American motion picture viewers--a factor which could have been a reflection of the lessening isolationist attitude of Americans at the opening of this century.

The sub-categories under transportation revealed a division of three films for automobiles, twenty-two for horse-drawn vehicles, thirty-seven for trains, and eighty-seven for water borne transportation.

A sub-division of the category of military activities revealed a fairly equal distribution of films between parades and reviews, war activities, and training. War activities were slightly in the lead, beginning in 1898 during the Spanish-American War. It was interesting to note that in the year preceeding this concentration on the Spanish-American War, the eight films depicting military activities were entirely devoted to training scenes.

The sub-categories under public services revealed nothing of special interest other than the ratio between fire, police, and postal activities which was almost a 2:1:2 ratio. However, all thirteen films depicting postal activities appeared in 1903 in what was apparently a series of films showing various activities of the United States Post Office.

Conclusions

The questions posed and some of the conclusions reached in an analysis of the content of American motion pictures produced prior to 1904 were as follows.

(1) What types of films seemed to be more prevalent among the pre-1904 motion pictures?

Motion pictures produced prior to 1904 exemplified a type of documentary approach to filmmaking. Basically, over three-fourths of the films produced in this early period were of this type which film historians had termed topical films and "actualities." This seemed to indicate that the earliest motion pictures were filmed records of the everyday activities and movements in life. These films did not fascinate their audiences because of the nature of the subject or the content of the film, but were a source of entertainment because of their life-like reproduction of subjects familiar to the viewers. Many of the early "documentary" films were a source of both entertainment and information. The viewer could not only see the familiar things of his environment on the motion picture screen, but could witness activities he had read about in the newspaper and see locales strange to him except in name.

(2) What subject matter appeared to predominate in these early films?

The analysis of the subject content of these films gave support to the theory that early films showed the viewer the world about him. The two most prevalent subject areas were scenic (travel) and transportation. Relating this predominance to the American social scene at the turn of the century, it

appears that the subject content of motion pictures produced at the time reflected the tendency credited to Americans of beginning to look beyond their own national borders and tempering their isolationism.

A large concentration of military subjects in the films studied showed that the more sensational current events were considered to be good subject matter for motion pictures. If they could not be obtained honestly, they were re-created as was the case with many films of the Spanish-American War.

(3) What trends, if any, were evident in the choice of subject matter for films produced during the period prior to 1904?

The most obvious trend reflected by the subject content of pre-1904 films was probably a natural one. This was the great and rather sudden concentration on military subjects dealing with the Spanish-American War during 1898 and 1899. The concurrent and rapid drop in film production during these same years was credited to the declining interest shown by the public in motion pictures. No conclusions could be reached on a correlation between the decline in production and the concentration on military subjects in 1898 and 1899, but it could be suggested that film producers considered that films on a remote but newsworthy affair such as the Spanish-American War would draw larger audiences. When the efforts shown in filmed reconstructions of the war were considered, it seemed that film producers must have placed a great deal of faith on the drawing power of this subject.

Film Techniques in the Pre-1904 Films and Some Descriptive Examples

Elements of film composition (the over-all structure of the film; choice of shots and arrangement of these shots) were used as a means of presenting a more complete exposition of the subject in these early films. Films containing techniques of film composition were generally of the news type or of a similar type where the photographic process took place under conditions which could not be controlled or in which the action could not be repeated. Since the action could not be manipulated, control was established by moving the camera and taking shots at various angles and various distances from the subject. News and sports films showed the greatest use and development of film techniques. However, when the news films were reconstructions, they revealed the old method of photographing in one shot and one angle.

"Taking President McKinley's Body from Train at Canton, Ohio," and "The 'Abbot' and 'Cresceus' Race" were unique in their use of varying shots and varying camera angles. These two films and at least four other films dealing with subjects related to news and current events were outstanding in their use of film composition techniques. Some of these films are described on the attached pages.

DESCRIPTION OF SEVEN OUTSTANDING FILMS

The following is a brief description of seven films taken from the sample studied. It was felt that these seven films contained elements which made them outstanding among films produced between 1897 and 1904, and which classified them as more advanced in the use of film techniques than the majority of films produced in those years. The identification of the film and the description of its content was taken from the data card of each film (see Appendix F).

"The 'Abbot' and 'Cresceus' Race"
Edison
Aug 1901
H7988

1. Follow action of horse coming out of stable into a MCU of preparations on horse; 2. MS of horse led out, followed by party; 3. CU, reverse angle, of head and shoulders of party (blurred); 4, 5. LS down track as they pass, crowd in background; 6. Attempted follow action for part of way; 7. From same position horse trots back to start; 8, 9. Two more attempts from same position as (6) for follow action (fairly successful but no further follow than to in front of camera); 10. MCU follow action as horse is circled for cooling; 11. MCU head and shoulders of viewing crowd from rail, pan to LS of activity on track. (Edited, this could have told a very complete story.)

"Admiral Dewey at State House, Boston"
Edison
Oct 1899
69558

1, 2, 3. Same angle from over heads of crowd of the party passing; 4. Very long take up a long flight of steps as party descends; someone stands in front of camera and cameraman quickly moves to one side but still misses the heads of people as they get close to bottom of stairs; 5. MS of Dewey and party passing (different angle than shot 4); 6-9. Head-on shot across path lined with crowds showing carriages and horses going past; camera started and stopped before Dewey passed and then held during and after his departure.

"The Artist's Dilemma"
Edison
Dec 1901
H11475

One scene, one shot: Artist sits with blank canvas; girl comes out of a large clock, artist sets her on platform and begins painting; an old woman (dressed like a clown) comes out of clock, gets bucket and big brush and with a few sweeps she paints the girl perfectly on the canvas; by stop motion the girl is brought out of the painting; girl on platform joins her twin who has just stepped out of the painting in a dance; they go behind one another and in stop motion one disappears; artist tries to embrace remaining girl, she turns into the clown who then jumps up and disappears; artist sits down confused.

"An Artist's Dream"
Edison
Mar 1900
D6369

One scene, one shot: As artist sleeps, devil enters and brings two girls in picture frames to life; they step out, artist awakes and begins to kiss one and she disappears instantly--same with the second girl; as second girl disappears two old women appear at other side and make overtures to artist; he starts to chase them away with stick and they turn into devil (who disappeared when the artist first awoke); devil gestures and artist disappears into his chair, asleep; devil gestures again and the two girls appear in the picture frames; devil gestures again and disappears in a leap as artist awakes, looks for girls, then figures he is going crazy. Excellent registration except for scenery shifting slightly when girls were brought back to picture frames. Positions generally remained stable in stop motion effects.

"Burning of Durland's Riding Academy"
Edison
Feb 1902
H14437

LS pan of activity of actual fire, stop and hold on fire hoses aimed into building; start short pan again; cut to MS of firemen holding hose on fire; pan to ruins behind them, pan back and into fire they are putting out; cut to smoldering ruins beyond onlookers.

"Meadowbrook Steeplechase"
American Mutoscope and Biograph Company
May 1903
H31758

1. Horses and riders pass right to left over hurdle; 2. Another hurdle, people run off screen to assist fallen rider; rider brought in from left, camera starts to follow or pans but loses everyone; 3. Another hurdle, horses jumping left to right; 4. Down the side of the track, rail in foreground, horses going right to left; 5. MCU of horses down track left to right; 6. LS follow action left to right of horses into a MS past the rails; 7. Same as above in (6) following action past observation post; stops and lets horses go out of frame; 8. MLS of winner over heads of crowd; 9. MCU of winner being led by official.

"Taking President McKinley's Body from Train at Canton, Ohio"
Edison
Sep 1901
H9083

1. MS of coffin taken from train and carried off right; 2. Cut-away to black crepe on building, coffin barely seen passing corner at left; 3. MS of coffin brought towards camera from right to left towards and past camera; 4. MCU (reverse angle) of coffin from the rear of the procession as it is carried and placed in hearse; doors are closed; 5. Final short jump out of last angle (4) with doors of hearse closed, people gone. No movement of camera during shots.